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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women: emerging issues, trends and new approaches to issues affecting the situation of women or equality between women and men

Statement submitted by the American Association of Retired Persons, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council representing over 32 million national and international members aged 50 years and older, brings to your attention the need to recognize the status of older women as an emerging issue, particularly in view of the impact of globalization of the media on older women.

Mass media imagery now projected worldwide comes, increasingly, from fewer sources. Those sources orient their communication towards youthful consumers because they are the ones with buying power. In the scramble to sell, the old and the poor fall by the wayside. Their images do not appear on the flickering screens which now dominate mountain huts and desert tents as surely as they do urban living rooms. Yet demographically the ageing grow in numbers, live longer and are more economically

impoverished than ever. Extended families no longer exist to support elders' needs. Women are significantly more numerous than men in these statistics.

That is why older women's faces and voices must be seen and heard and, more importantly, perceived as they truly are. Older women have long served as repositories of wisdom, counsellors, grandmothers, teachers of young and old, health practitioners, artists and leaders with a lifetime of experience upon which to draw. If those women's images disappear, which will be the case if current trends continue, future information will be provided exclusively by and for those who know very little about life's teaching. The mistakes of history will repeat themselves, for then history will indeed be dead.

A serious attempt to look at the reality of older women in the world and what impact the globalization of mass media has on that reality took place from 13-15 October 1999, when the United Nations, AARP and the Netherlands Platform on Older People in Europe collaborated to sponsor a symposium on that subject. World experts representing universities, the media and a wide range of professions travelled to New York to discuss the topic. The goal was to determine practical steps to improve the image of older women, creating a new appreciation of their true worth and their need to

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have access to basic human rights. Special attention was given to the areas of education, health, economy, political influence, the environment, the avoidance of violence and armed conflict, and other important themes established at the United Nations International Women's Conference at Beijing five years ago.

Five areas which require further research resulted from the three-day symposium:

- (a) Explore why older women disappear from media imagery after reaching their senior years and how that situation can be rectified;
- (b) Examine how local areas negotiate with global media organizations to permit programming to be shown or not shown;
- (c) Research ways to use the potential power of media to serve the cause of human rights for older women, encouraging media organization to maintain and promote a sense of civic duty;
- (d) Research ways to enlist the help of older women themselves to determine how their own images are to be shown and for what purpose;
- (e) Create educational programmes in such a way that the world population becomes as literate visually as it will, hopefully, one day become literate verbally.

In the move towards modernization, the media either tend to distort the reality of older women's complex lives or simply fail to depict it at all. Hence, the final insult: the invisible older woman. More research is needed to investigate how such misrepresentations or the lack of any image are translated into political and economic inequalities — not only for today's older women but for women of all ages. There is an urgent need to encourage global and local media to create images that reflect the diversity of older women's lives.

We urge the Commission on the Status of Women to place the issue of older women on the agenda of the special session of the General Assembly for the five-year review of the implementation of the outcome of the Fourth World Conference on Women as an emerging issue that requires the attention of all member States.